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Tim Burton and the Idea of Fairy Tales

Brian Ray

American filmmaker Tim Burton has, for nearly two decades, performed potent countermagic to Hollywood's syrupy adaptations of fairy tales and fables. While films like *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) illustrate the extent to which he has engaged the genre, Burton's links to towering figures like Washington Irving, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, Walt Disney, and others run deeper than many realize. The visionary and "slightly twisted" (Tiffin 2008, 148)[1] auteur began using fairy tales quite early, when he was still slaving during the 1980s as an underappreciated cartoonist in the dungeons of Disney Studios. Since those days, his efforts have delivered evocative interpretations of works ranging from "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327B) to "Beauty and the Beast" (ATU 425C). The release of a new *Alice in Wonderland* further identifies Burton as more than an occasional visitor to the shores of fairy tales. And yet, despite this growing body of work, his films have gone largely unstudied.

Although few researchers have given his films much attention,[2] Burton's distinct style begs consideration of the way this artist has spurred "transformations in the institution" of the fairy tale (Zipes 2000, xxviii). *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Corpse Bride* (2005), in particular, show the way Burton has worked to break what Jack Zipes calls "the

1 Jessica Tiffin is not the first to consider Burton's films disturbing (2008, 148). Her whirlwind tour of his engagement with fables, folktales, and fairy tales covers every groove of his oeuvre—albeit briefly—yet, as reflected in my essay, the list of secondary sources analyzing Burton is short.

2 An exception is Marina Warner, who mentions *Edward Scissorhands* as one of many variations of tale type 425C (1994, 314). A number of other articles and books refer to Burton's relationship to fairy tales and folktales but merely in passing.

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Disney spell" (1994, 95). Through consideration of these films, I advocate for Burton's place among the many directors such as "Jim Henson, Tom Davenport, John Sayles, and others . . . [who have] sought to . . . bring about new perspectives on the fairy tale and society through cinematic experimentation" (Zipes 2000, xxxi). Though Burton is often left out of this critical conversation, his films have indeed done as much or more to challenge the status quo.

Many biographical pieces on Burton acknowledge his tedious apprenticeship as a young animator with Disney Studios—countless hours spent in futile efforts to draw cuddly animals for *The Fox and the Hound* (directed by Ted Berman, Richard Rich, and Art Stevens, 1981), in addition to aborted work for *The Black Cauldron* (directed by Ted Berman and Richard Rich, 1985). His enthusiasm and energy waned considerably due to this lack of creative freedom. While employed there, Burton has said, he tended to sleep between twelve and fourteen hours a day, a fair amount of his time on the job. To trick his employers, he often dozed upright with a pen in one hand (Salisbury 1995, 10). During this sluggish period, Burton produced some short films such as *Vincent* (1982), *Hansel and Gretel* (1982), and *Frankenweenie* (1984), which enjoyed mixed success. *Frankenweenie* was praised and slated to run in theatres alongside a rerelease of *Pinocchio* (directed by Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen, 1940). Yet when this live-action short, about a reanimated dog's corpse, received a PG rating (indicating that "some material may not be suitable for children" [Reasons for Movie Ratings 2000]), it was pulled and essentially shelved.

Fortunately, *Vincent* did gain Burton some exposure, winning the Critics' Prize at the Annecy International Animated Film Festival and going on to play at festivals throughout Europe and the United States. Yet Disney executives tried (and failed) to impose their ideologies here as well, pressing Burton to glue on a happy ending where the morbid child protagonist snaps out of his gloom when his father invites him to a baseball game. The executives disliked the original ending—Vincent faking his own death so his mother will leave him alone—because it violated the studio's general tendency to represent children as docile and innocent (Hanke 2000, 41). Disney, of course, has always promoted an idealized version of adolescence that Burton's aesthetic rejects. By 1984 Burton's work had attracted the attention of Paul Reubens, who was writing the script for *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985). Their collaboration enabled the frustrated filmmaker a degree of expressive independence. His enormous success with *Batman*

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(1989)—described as a "violent urban fairy tale" (Hinson 1989)—landed him in a strategic position to begin experimenting with concepts and characters as he had hoped to do at Disney. Indeed, Burton would never have enjoyed such license to, say, direct a major motion picture about a boy with scissors for hands without first becoming a household name.

Edward Scissorhands

Burton's first few films all draw on fairy tale motifs to a large extent and so qualify as what Jeana Jorgensen refers to as "fairy tale pastiches" (2007, 218). But *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) is Burton's first full-length motion picture explicitly to use a fairy tale type, although he did so on a smaller scale with *Hansel and Gretel* as well as a short live-action/animated version of *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp* (1986). Working with and against the "Beauty and the Beast" type, *Edward* sliced through theaters the same year Disney released its own *Beauty and the Beast* (directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991) and shortly following the cancellation of Ron Koslow's immensely popular CBS television series *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–90). In Burton's film, Burbank—a suburb of Los Angeles, California—symbolizes mainstream America during the 1950s and 1960s, oft remembered as "the Eisenhower-era world of mass conformity with its standardized houses and lockstep mentality," where all were "expected to do and believe and behave the same way" (Hanke 2000, 26). Burton's interpretation of the tale type may seem haphazard, but it possesses a surprising degree of complexity, upsetting many social conventions and gender preconceptions.

The first fairy tale versions of "Beauty and the Beast" developed from the oral tradition of salon games in seventeenth-century France. Folk versions had actually circulated for hundreds of years, but folklorists attribute the first literary telling to Madame D'Aulnoy, who worked the motif of an animal or monstrous bridegroom into several stories (Zipes 1994, 25). Her tales sought to critique the decadent practices of the French elite and prescribe in their place more admirable traits, such as sincerity and fidelity. The later versions written for children, such as a story by Madame Gabrielle de Villeneuve, published in 1740, and one by Madame Le Prince de Beaumont in 1756, were modeled on D'Aulnoy's archetypes. But these later authors added some important twists. Self-denial and repression, rather than sincerity and fidelity, became key elements, and the heroine placed social values and manners before her own wants. In fact, the story "has been especially

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instrumental in rationalizing male domination, gender polarity, and violation" since the 1800s (Ibid., 36).

Many revisions of the tale reverse some of these elements while also scrutinizing the Beast's patriarchal authority, not to mention Beauty's unquestioning subservience toward men in general. In some retellings, such as Guy Wetmore Carryl's poem "How Beauty Contrived to Get Square with the Beast" (1902, 65), the heroine even exacts revenge on her captors. In more contemporary times, several of Angela Carter's well-known stories in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) also rework or reference the tale type. Carter's motivation for the retellings stems from a desire to "extract the latent content" of earlier versions and liberate them from Christian and bourgeois allegory (Haffenden 1985, 80).

Burton, however, has never made clear any feminist, psychoanalytic, or Marxist agendas. The inspiration for *Edward Scissorhands* "actually came from a drawing I did a long time ago. It was just an image that I liked. It came subconsciously and was linked to a character who wants to touch but can't" (quoted in Salisbury 1995, 87). The narrative framework proceeded from that concept; he did not necessarily begin with a desire to retell "Beauty and the Beast." Feminist elements in this film are due partly to Burton's recurring tendency toward feminine-styled heroes but, also, to screenwriter Caroline Thompson, who wrote the script for the film and later collaborated on *Corpse Bride*.[3]

Consequently, *Edward Scissorhands* departs from most retellings in the magnitude of its revision: a complete restructuring of the narrative, to begin with, and also a vast altering of character relationships. Two significant gender reversals are apparent even in the opening scenes. First, mother becomes father. Second, Beast becomes Beauty. In most versions of 425C, Beauty's father incurs the Beast's wrath by trespassing on his property. Burton's opening sequence follows this conventional setup except that the mother commits all of the acts the father previously did. Peg Boggs (Dianne Wiest) is the one who trespasses. She does not steal anything—contrary to most versions—but instead offers Edward (Johnny Depp) something (makeup). In this sense—working as a door-to-door seller from Avon—the mother also functions as merchant. Finally, she is not forced to stay in Edward's

3 Thompson could well serve as the subject of an article, but it is worth noting that she wrote the scripts for *The Addams Family* (directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (directed by Henry Selick, 1993). She also dated Burton's house musician, Danny Elfman (Page 2007, 80).

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castle. Instead, she brings him home. Here begins the second gender reversal. In most versions, of course, the father brings his daughter to the Beast. But Edward conversely winds up sleeping in Beauty's bed his first night in the Boggses' house. Thus, this retelling quickly becomes a feminist critique where Edward displaces his love interest, Kim Boggs (Winona Ryder), as the "innocent persecuted heroine," a familiar archetype for female characters in fairy tales and folktales.[4]

If, in most versions, Beauty views her servitude to the Beast as an act that simply trades one patriarchal figure—in this case, the inventor whom Edward calls Father (Vincent Price)—for another, then Edward's move into the Boggses' household trades a patriarchal figure for a matriarchal one. On a broader level, Edward's physical journey from his gothic-style mansion into the suburbs of Burbank also coincides with a psychological one toward maturity and inner completion, goals usually reserved for Beauty.[5] Burton establishes all of these complex plot and character shifts in the beginning scenes, masking the structure so well that audiences may not realize for some time the affinities between film and fairy tale.

Although Edward behaves like an innocent persecuted heroine, he does not exactly resemble one. His most monstrous attribute is his hands. They provide powerful symbols for traditional themes in "Beauty and the Beast," in particular the idea of a young woman's ascension to adulthood. Because gender operates largely as a social construction,[6] Edward's relationship to his sexual self and his community has presumably suffered due to his long-term isolation. Imagine a Beauty who not only must navigate an intricate web of male desires but must also learn basic social skills in a dramatically short time. Edward's sharp hands emphasize and complicate his incomplete initiation into the symbolic order, an important stage in psychosexual growth.[7]

4 Although Cristina Bacchilega (1993) does not include Beauty among her list of innocent persecuted heroines, this character does possess many of the traits she enumerates. Twentieth Century Fox executives favored Tom Cruise for the role of Edward. Tom Hanks and Michael Jackson were also possibilities (Page 2007, 80).

5 See also Ming-Hsun Lin's consideration in this volume of Harry Potter as Cinderella, another partial transgendering of a traditional figure.

6 In her chapter in this collection, Christy Williams references Judith Butler's notion of performative sexuality to discuss the construction of gender in her consideration of Cinderella. Also a persistent argument in my essay is that Burton's films do more than make empty appeals to feminism for ulterior purposes.

7 Jacques Lacan's mirror stage—and his general principle of movement among the realms of imaginary, symbolic, and real—chronicle the development of the human

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Jacques Lacan's conception of the *Real*—that which resists immersion into the symbolic order—provides insight into Edward's problematic relationship to the conformist suburb of Burbank. Through Lacan's approach, we see that "Edward Scissorhands . . . epitomizes the postmodern subject" as one "condemned to pure gaze since he knows that touching the beloved will cause him or her unbearable pain" (Žižek 1991, 59–60).[8] And yet, like Beauty, Edward is subjected to others' inspection as well. He is made Other by his new family and their community. His journey to sexual adulthood deconstructs the moral that mainstream versions of "Beauty and the Beast" represent: the necessary subjection of women to patriarchy and fathers.

Traditionally, castration by the father enables a male's initiation into the symbolic order.[9] Edward missed castration since his creator died and left him stranded in adolescence. His phallic authority, moreover, is also undermined by the experiences that this authority prevents: touch, communication, and communion. From the struggle for acceptance to minute tasks like dressing, eating, or drinking, his phallic hands impede his desires. Yet at other times, they enable him to sculpt, groom pets, style hair, and unlock doors. They also serve as intentional and accidental weapons. Only in this way do they fulfill their function as phallus, and then only partially. Critics have even debated about whether Edward means to kill Kim's boyfriend, Jim (Anthony Michael Hall), at the end of the film (Page 2007, 89). The phallus inevitably becomes ambiguous; Edward appears androgynous, embodying aspects of both Beauty and Beast. He wears makeup at times to conceal his scars. His punkish hair—reminiscent of Lydia's hairdo in *Beetle Juice* (1988)—also blurs gender lines. Even more conspicuously, his voice sounds soft and feminine.

being, where he or she learns at six months of age to tie subjectivity to an image. The movement from the imaginary (preverbal) to the symbolic order occurs when the person learns no from the father, rather than yes from the mother. The phallus (not the imaginary one attributed to the mother) initiates humans at a young age to the symbolic realm, where language mediates between wants and that which can either grant or refuse them (Evans 1996, 83, 115–17, 159).

8 In Žižek's analysis of Lacan, this is the only reference he makes to Burton.

9 Lacan's theories do exclude the female from initiation into the symbolic order—somewhat problematically. Like Freud, he argued that the female's lack of a phallus leads to the desire for a child, which acts as a temporary substitute (Evans 1996, 118). Many scholars and philosophers have addressed this dilemma, but, in regard to a Lacanian reading of Burton, it becomes an opportunity. If Burton's films radically revise fairy tales like "Beauty and the Beast," then they also update Lacan by making the male almost completely androgynous.

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Audiences can chronicle Edward's psychological development, his movement through the mirror stage of identity formation in particular. On his first day in the Boggses' house—while standing in Kim's bedroom, no less—he spends several seconds staring at his reflection and then reaches out to touch it. He remains docile and compliant throughout the first half of the film, largely because the multiple insults he receives simply do not register. Edward's first self-conscious, violent, and perhaps adult reaction occurs only after Kim's boyfriend, Jim, has taunted him: the first sign of male competition. He rampages through the house and winds up standing before the bathroom mirror, staring demonically into his own image as he shreds the wallpaper. In this scene, Edward acknowledges his reflection and, for the first time, equates his abnormal appearance with his identity. His angry expression also signals that he has identified his sexual desire for Kim, a realization that Burton represents as frightening. At this point, he momentarily enters the phallic realm where "cold silence itself starts to function as something infinitely more threatening than violent roars" (Žižek 1991, 58).

One historical figure, Kaspar Hauser, further illuminates Edward's roughshod road to maturity. An awkward young man, Hauser inexplicably appeared in Nuremburg Square in 1828 knowing little language aside from a few prayers and phrases and claimed he had grown up in a dark cave devoid of contact with the outside world. Hauser's existence threatens the symbolic order because it presents evidence of human beings existing outside or beyond the social. As Slavoj Žižek argues, "The Lacanian diagnosis of Kaspar can be succinctly put—he was the subject who had not been captured by his image in the mirror; in other words, *he was the subject without an ego.* . . . Hauser was thrown straight into the symbolic network, bypassing the imaginary (mis)recognition that enables one to experience oneself as a 'person'" (Ibid., 65–66). This story precisely describes Edward's condition. While Hauser never learned to identify his reflection, Edward does eventually accept his own image, a progression that symbolizes his attempt to gain acceptance in Burbank's rigid social structure.

Edward's innocence and docility—at odds with his appearance—become a vehicle for social commentary. Burton radically undermines the importance of manners and etiquette, a feature in many of the early literary versions of "Beauty and the Beast." Indeed, an attempt "to graft Edward back into family and community leads instead to the rupture of the community's own unarticulated sutures of desire" (Potter 1992, para. 5). In almost all early versions, the ugly bridegroom woos the heroine with

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displays of chivalry, manners, and general good breeding that hint at his social superiority.[10] The heroine, likewise, is a paragon of grace.

By contrast, Edward's profound naïveté and timidity persist in the face of enculturation. He does not conform, despite some genuine attempts. His interactions with others, in fact, often unmask the hypocrisy in the community and prompt audiences to interrogate Burbank's suburban social codes. During one of many dinner scenes, a neighbor uses etiquette as an excuse not to eat anything Edward serves because "he used his hands," blatantly neglecting her own manners. Meanwhile, Jim talks with his mouth full about how much he hates his father. Later, when Kim's father Bill (Alan Arkin) asks Edward what he would do if he found a large bag of money, Edward naïvely says he would "buy things for my loved ones." The entire family corrects him—except Kim, who voices a defense. "Isn't that a much nicer thing?" she asks. Even Edward's creator tries to school him in etiquette, reading to him from conduct books. "Should the man rise when he accepts his cup of tea?" the inventor blandly recites, only to leave the question unanswered when he gives up on the lesson, calling it "boring," in favor of poetry.

Most significantly, no external change occurs in the film. That Edward never obtains human hands violates the standard script and rejects the idea that a Beast needs to change. This lack of physical transformation encourages viewers to consider his internal alterations and find values in "Beauty and the Beast" that have largely given way to shallow aspirations toward wealth and conformity. This rejection of mainstream readings of the tale draws attention to Kim's internal development as well. Indeed, the transformation at the core of versions by D'Aulnoy "centers on the girl, not the beast'" (Bryant 1989, 448).[11] So much holds true, in part, for Kim Boggs. D'Aulnoy's versions of "Beauty and the Beast" hinge on emotional growth—namely the cultivation of sincerity, honesty, and trust. As in D'Aulnoy's tales, Kim's development surfaces in her ultimate decision to refute dominant social codes that threaten to destroy Edward. In the beginning, Kim

10 As Marina Warner points out, one exception occurs in Villeneuve's tale, where Beauty "finds [Beast] boring because he can utter only a few words and repeats them endlessly" (1994, 299).

11 Marina Warner, especially, finds a tendency in contemporary adaptations that resists the traditional transformation of Beast. "The Beast no longer needs to be disenchanted. Rather, Beauty has to learn to love the beast in him, in order to know the beast in herself" (1994, 312). In this context, *Edward Scissorhands* makes a brief appearance in Warner's work as a further example of a Beast who does not need to change.

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Boggs differs little from one of a dozen stereotypical blond teenagers from TV sitcoms in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Burton prompts viewers, in fact, to identify her as a cheerleader brat—a stock character incapable of depth or change. Initially Kim acts spoiled, cynical, and selfish. She makes little effort to veil her dislike or fear of Edward. When they first meet, she bursts into obnoxious screams at the sight of him lying in her bed.

Kim never scolds her boyfriend, Jim, for making fun of Edward unless it somehow embarrasses her. She also causes Edward tremendous chagrin by failing to come forward when the Burbank police arrest him for breaking and entering, although she is the one who talked him into it. Her eventual guilt parallels the grief of the heroine in D'Aulnoy's "The Ram," where the beast bridegroom dies as a result of her prolonged absence (Zipes 1994, 27). Beauty in "The Ram" fails to keep her word, just as Kim fails to tell the truth. In that vein, the film also resists the popular fairy tale ending. Edward doesn't die or transform or marry but lives out the rest of his life hidden away inside his castle. While the community at large shares the blame, Kim's moral failure certainly contributes to the film's gray ending.

And yet Kim achieves a significant amount of positive agency, outsmarting the town into thinking Edward has died in order to protect him—therefore saving him, so to speak, and maintaining his role as innocent persecuted heroine. She is never rescued from her violent, controlling boyfriend but learns to save herself (albeit aided by Edward's accidental stabbing). In fact, the only other figure who needs saving is Kim's brother, Kevin (Robert Oliveri), whom Edward pushes from the path of Jim's van. Finally, Kim maintains narrative control of the film. The entire story unfolds within a framed narrative told to her granddaughter. So, in contrast to many adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast"—related from the perspective of a distant and often unidentified narrator—Kim can clearly articulate her own moral and psychological development. These numerous departures—from Edward's hybrid sexuality to Kim's elevated agency—show that *Edward Scissorhands* goes well beyond the "pop feminism" in many of its contemporaries (Craven 2002, 130). Beauty and Beast operate as roles that Edward and Kim both inhabit at various points, but they are not limited to them. The roles are blurred and traded—shared.

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Sleepy Hollow

Burton's use of fairy tale ebbed after *Edward Scissorhands.* But though he moved away from the explicit use of tale types and motifs in subsequent films such as *Batman Returns* (1992), *Ed Wood* (1994), and *Mars Attacks!* (1996), the filmmaker returned to them with enthusiasm in the late 1990s, and he has largely remained there since. This trend has roots in *Sleepy Hollow,* his most free-associative retelling. With *Sleepy Hollow,* Burton began to take heat for his supposedly unfaithful incorporation of source material. But rather than attack his films for their disloyalty to urtexts, scholars might view them as prime examples of "new media texts" and search for latent value in their "schizophrenic instrumentalization of fairy tale matter" (Jorgensen 2007, 218).[12]

Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* straddles the border between dark parody and pastiche. The film provides adept commentary on authorship in fairy tales and folktales, one that requires some consideration of history. While Washington Irving's story remains the version most Americans know best, the early American writer drew on a number of sources. There is a surprising degree of cross-pollination among American, German, and Irish versions of the story of the headless horseman. In his collection *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales,* W. B. Yeats mentions a faerie known as the *dullahan,* a spirit that rides a headless horse or drives a stagecoach led by headless horses, brandishing a whip made from a human spine (2003, 118). Yeats only briefly describes this horseman, referring readers to the nineteenth-century Irish folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker, who devotes several stories to the *dullahan*. Croker's description anticipates Disney's fiery animation, a head which the horseman carries

> under [his] . . . right arm . . . and such a head no mortal ever saw before. It looked like a large cream cheese hung round with black puddings: no speck of colour enlivened the ashy paleness of the depressed features; the skin lay stretched over the unearthly surface almost like the parchment head of a drum. Two fiery eyes of prodigious circumference, with a strange and irregular motion, flashed like meteors . . .

12 In their essay in this volume, Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder explore generic hybridization in several films that draw on aspects of fairy tales and folktales without incorporating specific plotlines. They study the rhetorical effects of genre hybridization, in particular, and make a case for Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) as one of the few films that genuinely deconstruct the dominant ideology of contemporary fairy tales.

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> and to complete all, a mouth reached from either extremity of two ears, which peeped forth from under a profusion of matted locks of lustreless blackness. (1825, 234–35)

In his notes to the story, Croker goes on to state that during "the early part of the last century the headless horse was not unknown in England," taking the motif back to the eighteenth century and perhaps earlier (Ibid., 240).

The Brothers Grimm translated Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* into German a year after its initial publication (Hennig 1946, 44). But even before reading Croker, the Grimms had collected a brief account of a headless horseman that appears in *Deutsche Sagen,* originally published in 1816 and later translated and edited by Donald Ward in 1981. The Grimms' legend possesses little or no plotline, merely recounting an incident where "a woman of Dresden" sees "a man without a head, dressed in a long grey cloak and riding upon a grey horse" (Grimm 1981, 246). The spirit eventually reveals himself as the ghost of a man named Hans Jagenteufel, who is punished for his inhumane treatment of the poor. Ward traces the appearance of headless ghosts in Euro-North American culture all the way to Iceland, where during the Middle Ages, sightings of headless living corpses were not uncommon (Ibid., 412).

But Irving undoubtedly plucked the ideas for his horseman from the pages of an even earlier source than the Grimms: Johann Karl August Musäus, author of a collection of German stories first published between 1782 and 1787. Irving traveled through Germany and Austria in 1822–23, and his deep fascination with the land's folktales led him to Musäus, from whom he borrowed heavily (Reichart 1957, 31). The horseman appears briefly, but poignantly, in Musäus's fifth legend of Rübezahl, a German folk spirit—first described as "a jet-black figure, of a size exceeding that of man, crowned with a broad Spanish tippet; but what was the most suspicious circumstance in its whole appearance, was its being without a head" (Musäus 1791, 147). The strange figure turns out indeed to have a head but chooses to carry it "under his arm, just as if it [were] a lap-dog" (Ibid., 150).

The terrified coach driver, conveying a countess through the mountains haunted by Rübezahl, tries to greet the figure. But it "hurls" its head at him, striking the driver "on the forehead" and causing him to fall "headlong from the box over the fore-wheel." A lord by the name of Giantdale (Rübezahl in disguise) saves the party from this specter, and once the "mask and drapery were presently stripped away," an "ordinary fellow" appears

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underneath—"just of the shape of an ordinary man" (Ibid., 153). The would-be robber, who attempts to steal the party's coach and horses, turns out to be a pauper by the name of Robin, who eventually appeals to the lord for amnesty. Thus, the horseman holds a relatively trivial place, functioning largely as a red herring.

In his retelling of Musäus, Irving abandoned many aspects of the original tale, although others such as "the fantastic adventure at midnight, the headless horseman who threw his detached head at Ichabod's skull, the unexpected denouement that implicates a disguised rival, and the hurled pumpkin" belong fundamentally to this German version (Reichart 1957, 31). Given the wide degree of variation among these tales, then, one can hardly fault Burton for any freewheeling improvisation.

Burton primarily discusses his familiarity with contemporary versions of the tale, giving a vague impression that he may never have read Irving's story that closely for inspiration. "I probably remember it more from the Disney cartoon actually," he has said (Kermode 2000, para. 4). "I talked to a lot of people who thought they knew the story" but retained—more than any literal memory—"the power of that image and the setting" (Ibid.). This eclecticism is typical for Burton, whose influences include movies adapted from Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, and Bram Stoker rather than the original literature. His brand of pastiche constitutes "a subjective interpretation of a half-informed memory," rather than a conscious revision (Hanke 2000, xvii). This form of influence characterizes in general Burton's style. While the 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (directed by Robert Wiene) influenced Burton's animated short *Vincent,* for example, he admits that he never saw the film beforehand—only posters and stills from magazines.

This cursory attention to sources leads some critics to see Burton as "sloppy, suggesting that he doesn't do his homework properly to reproduce slavishly the look of his film 'models'" (Ibid.). To counter such charges, Burton has spoken on one or two occasions about his influences, including fairy tales:

> Because I never read, my fairy tales were probably those monster movies. To me they're fairly similar. I mean, fairy tales are extremely violent and extremely symbolic and disturbing, probably even more so than *Frankenstein* and stuff like that, which are kind of mythic and perceived as fairy tale like. But fairy tales, like the Grimms' fairy tales, are probably closer to movies like *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, much rougher, harsher, full of bizarre symbolism. . . . I think I've

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> always liked the idea of fairy tales or folktales, because they're symbolic of something else. There's a foundation to them, but there's more besides, they're open to interpretation. . . . So I think I didn't like fairy tales specifically. I liked the *idea* of them more. (quoted in Salisbury 1995, 3)

The idea of the horseman—and but a few plot elements or character relationships—connects Musäus, the Brothers Grimm, Croker, Irving, Disney, and Burton—who finally elevates the horseman from a legend that Von Brunt (Casper Van Dien) exploits to a real supernatural killer: the Hessian (Christopher Walken). Nonetheless, some of Burton's bold departures do contribute a coherent agenda that underlies and facilitates his improvisational retelling.

Von Brunt's death serves as a vivid example of an ostensibly sloppy break from source material that in fact constitutes a sophisticated act of revision. Incorporating generic elements of mystery, suspense, and detective stories, *Sleepy Hollow* makes the identity of the horseman a key question in a way that Irving did not. Prior to the scene where Von Brunt dies, he is a suspect—if not in Ichabod's mind, then at least for audiences who draw on their prior knowledge of Irving's tale. The unexpected death severs audiences violently from such conjecture. Moreover, Von Brunt is the only victim of the horseman who does not lose his head. Rather, he is torn in half. Not only is he removed as a suspect in a split second, but he is also clearly not a prime target of the Hessian's killing spree and, therefore, not integral to the plot. (The Hessian does not kill randomly and so tries to spare this persistent hero.) In the end, Von Brunt plays a simplified role in Burton's version of the tale that mirrors Musäus's use of the horseman: a red herring.

The fragmentation of themes and motifs in earlier versions (torn apart like Von Brunt) also undergirds the relationships between characters, as well as methods through which the story unfolds. Burton purposefully conflates physical and psychological dislocation. The frequent decapitations and other acts of violence provide more than a string of shocks: they coordinate ideas and characters. The starkest example involves the symbiosis between Ichabod and the Hessian. In Irving's version, no real character traits bind them. The horseman is simply Von Brunt's alter ego. In Burton's adaptation, however, they share a great deal that escapes an uncritical eye. To begin with, they are both outsiders—the one a foreign mercenary, the other an urbanite unaccustomed to rural life. The Hessian kills out of desire for his head; he wishes to be a whole person. Ichabod tries to save lives through

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criminal investigation to fulfill a similar hunger for unity. His journey to Sleepy Hollow awakens fragments of his past that he eventually pieces together. The Hessian's reunion with his skull corresponds to Ichabod's reconnection with his terrifying childhood, which he must confront to achieve emotional solidarity.

Burton's Ichabod has suffered intense psychological trauma as a child, watching his father brutally murder his mother in Puritan zeal. The figure of Ichabod's dead mother (Lisa Marie) may qualify as the film's single most gruesome image. Ichabod's history—like the Hessian's—unfolds through a series of violent and disjointed scenes that possess clear stylistic differences from the rest of the film. Cuts between shots in these flashbacks (Ichabod's as well as the Hessian's) are often sharp and jarring. Close-ups are quick and gruesome. These scenes are also devoid of dialogue. It follows, then, that the main conflict's resolution occurs when Ichabod, rather than escaping or defeating his adversary, delivers to him the desired skull without a second's hesitation. That he never even instructs the horseman to release Katrina Van Tassel (Christina Ricci) implies a kind of blind trust, or understanding, that a reconstituted body will end his killing spree.

Fragmentation also converges with ownership and authenticity. As with so many tales, Disney had by the mid-twentieth century all but copyrighted many classics and made them distinctly American, at least in the Euro-North American imagination. In the case of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Disney had appropriated and commodified one of the few truly American tales. The effect is not unlike raiding a national treasure in the sense that Irving's intentions to comment on class and gender in the original story faded into the background of animation spectacle.[13] Speaking of this phenomenon, Burton says, "I think in America . . . there's not the wealth of stories, folktales and fairy tales, that there are in other countries. . . . [Irving's tale] was one of the only early American folktales and that's why I was drawn to it" (Kermode 2000, para. 4). A retelling of Irving's story

13 Stanley Orr identifies the original Ichabod Crane as "an emissary of metropolitan culture," noting the way Irving describes the schoolhouse as an "empire" or "realm" that brings civilization to the frontier (2003, 45). Disney's cartoon does not necessarily eliminate this aspect of Irving's story, but nonetheless the class tension between Ichabod and Von Brunt is buried in endless episodes of slapstick comedy. Additionally Orr argues that Burton and the screenplay's author, Andrew Kevin Walker, transformed the horseman from a paradoxical symbol of colonial harmony into a savage Other who reminds Sleepy Hollow of its "bloody colonial history" (Ibid., 47).

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necessitates coming to terms, so to speak, with Disney's version, which is dominated by a chipper, sing-songy narrator and slapstick comedy.

Especially in relation to Disney's cartoon, Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* becomes a study in ownership and visual signature. Signs and signatures recur through Burton's film, which in fact opens with the image of a disembodied hand scrawling a signature across a will and sealing it with red wax. The hand belongs to Van Garrett senior (Robert Sella), whose murder sets the plot in motion, prompting the town leaders to scheme to obtain his property. Katrina Van Tassel, who ultimately inherits her father's estate, protects Ichabod with pagan symbols (the evil eye) that denote control over a given space. In that sense, she signs his living quarters by chalking a symbol beneath his head, exercising ownership over it. Katrina tries the same evil-eye signature to protect her father (Michael Gambon), preventing the Hessian's entry into the town church, though the horseman manages to outsmart her. When Katrina's stepmother, Lady Van Tassel (Miranda Richardson), decapitates her servant, she fools Ichabod and the rest of Sleepy Hollow by slicing, or signing, the corpse's hand—to pass off the corpse as her own.

In all cases, Ichabod must learn to read these signs properly to solve the mystery, and his initial misreading of Katrina's symbols leads him to suspect her erroneously as the murderer. (A similar sign also drives Ichabod's pious father [Peter Guinness] to kill his mother.) While Ichabod initially interprets the evil eye as a threat, he chances to discover that the image provides "protection against evil spirits" by accidentally flipping to a passage in the spell book Katrina has given him as a gift. Furthermore, he uncovers the crux of the mystery in the public notary's office, a warehouse of signatures. The film closes on a now-familiar reference to writing—Lady Van Tassel's twitching hand as it protrudes from the Tree of Death.

Image, sign, and signature play a crucial role in one scene when the horseman (actually Von Brunt dressed as him) appears and emulates a famous scene from Disney's cartoon, complete with a frog that calls Ichabod's name before plopping into the water and a flaming jack-o'-lantern. This particular scene goes beyond mere homage. Typically, when Burton borrows images and concepts from other films, he does so with a degree of creative interpretation that can (as mentioned before) be mistaken for sloppiness. In few other places has the director gone into such detail to simulate a prior work. Here Burton seems to mock Disney's supposed ownership of the tale.

In some fairy tales, a magician may reverse or break a spell by reading it backward—a verbal mirror, so to speak. Through mirroring the

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cartoon, Burton breaks the Disney spell. Those who tried to erase Irving are now "forced to witness the grim spectacle of the Horseman's true menace" (Kevorkian 2003, 30).[14] Burton drives the message home when the horseman removes his costume, revealing Von Brunt. The entire scene is a hoax—an image—that hints that the cartoon is merely a joke and not authoritative in the least. Disney's mythologized version of Irving's tale is effectively demythologized. In the same way, the complete remodeling of the story reminds viewers and critics alike that no single urtext for these tales exists, and therefore one cannot dictate truly what distinguishes a faithful from an unfaithful retelling.

Corpse Bride

Burton's *Corpse Bride*, too, exemplifies a complex web of source material. A story by Howard Schwartz entitled "The Finger" is one of the most recent literary adaptations of tale type ATU 365, "The Dead Bridegroom Carries Off His Bride," and it in turn draws from a tale dating back to a much earlier story about the kabbalist Isaac Luria in a collection entitled *Shivhei ah-Ari (In Praise of the Ari)*.[15] This original tale about Luria, first published in 1629, involves a young man who accidentally weds a demon rather than a corpse—and it concludes on a comparatively mundane note. Luria simply annuls the marriage and tells the demon to return to the underworld. The moral or meaning has to do with the rabbi's role as communal leader and his power over the spiritual and supernatural.

The tale also condemns acts of sacrilege. The Jewish story that *Corpse Bride* builds on incorporates the Venus-ring motif (accidental marriage to a statue), which provides a direct counterstatement to Chrys Ingraham's

14 Martin Kevorkian argues that the grinning jack-o'-lantern in the film's beginning "stands in for Irving's explanatory authority" (2003, 30), which heavily suggests that the horseman does not exist. He notes the conspicuous absence of the term "legend" in Burton's title. Disney's film, likewise, heavily implies that Von Brunt is the horseman's alter ego.

15 Many sources on the Web and in print, ranging from a major Tim Burton fan site (the Tim Burton Collective) to the *Village Voice* (Atkinson 2005), have misattributed the source of Burton's film to a vague nineteenth-century retelling of the original version. Jewish folktale expert Howard Schwartz assured me in an e-mail on May 12, 2008, that his short story, "The Finger," in his collection entitled *Lilith's Cave,* is the first adaptation of the Venus-ring motif to make the bride a corpse, rather than a demon. He did so "to make it more of a tale of terror." Furthermore, Schwartz's story is the only version that Burton and Warner Bros. officially acknowledge as inspiration.

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notion of "the wedding-industrial complex" that Disney—among many other entities—perpetuates through films and merchandising (2008, 87–89).[16] If contemporary versions of popular tales trivialize marriage as an institution, as many scholars have noted, then Burton's adaptation of this old story both critiques and affirms marriage. His portrayal of the corpse bride offers a corrective on somewhat misogynistic elements of older stories about accidental matches.

In *Reimagining the Bible: Storytelling of the Rabbis,* Howard Schwartz discusses the demon bride motif at length, citing several versions, including "The Queen of Sheeba," where a demoness seduces a shopkeeper, and "The Demon in the Tree," where a young man slips a ring on a demon's finger, mistaking it for a friend with whom he is playing hide-and-seek (1998). The demon in the latter narrative haunts the man for the rest of his life, killing successive wives until the third wife arranges a compromise to share their husband. These versions, according to Schwartz, became popular in the sixteenth century (Ibid., 68). The tale structure seems to have circulated in and out of popularity for the following two centuries.

The Jewish theme of the demon or corpse bride borrows from an even older story that circulated through Europe during the medieval period, involving the marriage of a man to a statue of Venus. In all variations of the Venus-ring tale, a priest manages to save this irresponsible or naïve young man from his dim fate. The story provides some excellent commentary on the hybridization of pagan and Christian cultures during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it is also an interesting counter-tale to type 425—"The Search for the Lost Husband." In the various versions of 425C especially, readers may note irony in the fact that a woman earns rewards for loyalty and devotion to an ugly husband, whereas a man who commits sacrilege and winds up accidentally betrothed to a statue, demon, or corpse only needs to consult his local rabbi or priest to restore harmony. The original tales—outside of "The Demon in the Tree"—deliver little consequence or punishment to the husband.

Venus herself has embodied numerous and often competing themes over the past thousand years. In the earliest known version of the narrative by William of Malmesbury, circa 1125, a member of the Roman nobility places his wedding ring on a statue of Venus while playing an athletic game.

16 For an extended discussion of the way the dominant trends in the fairy tale film industry reinforce gender norms through their representation of marriage and wedding ceremonies, see Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse's essay in this volume.

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The statue seizes the ring and will not let it go, and later that night the goddess appears in bed with him and his wife. To regain his ring and save his marriage, the nobleman must consult a priest named Palumbus, who knows how to perform black magic. Subsequent versions, like one appearing in the mid-twelfth-century epic German poem *Kaiserchronik* (Ziolkowski 1977, 29), further demonize Venus by making her a seductress, rather than a nuisance. She cons the young man—Astrolabius in this version—out of his ring. He then suffers spiritually and emotionally—hypnotized by the devil-like spirit—until a priest can work countermagic to save his soul.

The Venus-ring tale was "one of the most popular legends of late medieval and early Renaissance Europe" (Ibid., 31). The story subsequently faded in and out of popularity with a revival in the 1800s, when Venus signified the dark forces of nature that threaten rationality and order—notions that evolved during the Enlightenment. By the end of the nineteenth century, Venus "embodies the power of primitive passion in contrast to the sterility of civilization . . . either positively or negatively depending on the standpoint of the writer" (Ibid., 75). For authors like Henry James, "the statue represents a dangerous intrusion into the order of nineteenth-century society, a threat to order and civilization" (Ibid.). Essentially the motif has undergone a series of mutations to promote the values of the hour, like many tales.

Burton's version re-eroticizes the Venus figure but also humanizes her. His film portrays her as innocently sexual, sensitive, and expressive. Despite her decay, Emily appears markedly more erotic than Victor's fiancée. Victoria Everglot wears her hair in a bun, for example, while Emily's hair streams behind her when she dances—something Victoria never does. She makes jokes, for example, when she stands at an overlook in the underworld. "Isn't the view beautiful?" she asks. "It takes my breath away. Well, it would if I had any." Emily plays the piano. Victoria plays no instrument, by contrast, and she makes no jokes or puns outside of chuckling at Lord Barkis when he discovers her family's secret poverty. Her mother has forbidden her to express herself beyond cordialities. "Mother won't let me near the piano," Victoria says on the day of her wedding rehearsal. "Music is improper for a young lady. 'Too passionate,' she says.'" Finally, Victoria's face, lips, and eyebrows move much less than Victor's or Emily's when they act or speak. Her arms remain somewhat motionless as well.

Female agency becomes a subtle theme as the Venus figure is humanized and plays off of audience expectations. Like Edward, Emily assumes the role of the Real, resisting symbolism and classification. What is she, a villain

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or an innocent persecuted heroine? In some ways, she fits the "castrating bitch" archetype that Laura Sells sees as the quintessential villain of many Disney films (1995, 181). Although Emily's demeanor is benevolent, she holds Victor in wedlock against his will, and her temper flares when he tries to escape to Victoria. As the film progresses, audiences recognize elements of the innocent persecuted heroine when they hear a disturbing song that recounts her death at the hands of a vagabond trickster. Here the film coyly implies that the answer to Victoria's problems lie—through "the wedding-industrial complex"—in marriage (Ingraham 2008, 87–89). If only someone else would marry the poor corpse bride, then all of the film's external conflicts would fade away, permitting Victor's freedom.[17] Audiences may indeed expect Victor to go search for a more suitable suitor than himself, perhaps Rhett Butler's corpse.

Such is not the case, fortunately. Only after the demise of her killer, Barkis Bittern, and a Hamlet-like acceptance of mortality and fate, can Emily achieve final peace, the best ending she can hope for. In a way similar to the moral of *Pan's Labyrinth,* it is a hard lesson for child and adult viewers alike: death cannot be reversed by dislodging a chunk of poison apple or waking someone with a kiss. Death is a permanent transformation and also a phase in a cycle, a message driven home by Victoria's sudden and surprising dissolution into butterflies.

In a final and important twist to earlier stories that use the Venus-ring motif, Emily leaves the living couple of her own accord—neither exorcised by a religious authority figure, compromised with, nor placated. As *Corpse Bride* illustrates, Burton's heroines indeed possess a lioness's share of agency. They tell their own stories and resolve their own problems. They do not rely exclusively on men or authority figures. And their independence—contrasted with the timidity of their male companions—appears a good deal more genuine than that of many other contemporary heroines.

Burton also breaks with tradition by pushing the tale's male protagonist through a stage of emotional development. Even Schwartz's tale largely relieves its main character, Reuven, of consequences. He simply crawls to the elder rabbis, who, after some deliberation, declare the marriage "null

17 Cristina Bacchilega points out the patriarchal constraints, as well as the social construction of gender, within the subgenre of innocent persecuted heroine stories that push women through narratives toward fulfillment of a hero's desire, not their own (1993, 5). *Corpse Bride* questions such constructions of gender, as this essay argues.

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and void" (1998, 52). Afterward Reuven appears largely unchanged despite his encounter. By contrast, significant transformations occur in Victor that are similar to those experienced by Beauty in tale type 425C. Internally he overcomes his fear of commitment and the social anxieties that have previously marred his vows.[18] Most importantly, he also accepts the corpse bride midway through the film, agreeing to kill himself so his marriage to Emily will become permanent. Victor's ultimate commitment to "drink the wine of ages" parallels the transformation that D'Aulnoy privileges in her versions of "Beauty and the Beast": trust and honesty. In this way, the film subverts the moral in most tales using the Venus-ring motif—all problems supernatural and spiritual can be solved by visiting one's local priest or rabbi.

Accordingly, another difference between film and folklore lies in the clergy's portrayal. In demon-bride and Venus-ring tales alike, the priest can manipulate the supernatural world and command the spirits. The early tales promoted confidence and faith in religious authority. *Corpse Bride* saps this power from its only clergy member, Pastor Galswells, whom Victoria consults after discovering Victor's "unholy" marriage. "You are the only one in the village who knows of what awaits beyond the grave," she implores. "Can the living marry the dead? There must be some way to undo what's been done." She begs Galswells for help like all protagonists of previous versions. But not only does he lack the power to resolve the problem; he exacerbates it by returning Victoria to her grouchy parents. "She's speaking in tongues," he exclaims, "of unholy alliances. Her mind has come undone, I fear." In this scene, Burton undermines expectations perhaps more consciously than ever before. Additionally Galswells fails to keep a mass of the dead from entering his church to attend Emily and Victor's wedding. "Be gone, ye demons from Hell. Back to the void from whence you came," he proclaims, brandishing his staff. "You shall not enter here." The only response comes in the form of a joke: "Keep it down," says one of the skeletons. "We're in a church." Meanwhile the crowd moves calmly past.

Burton may remain more deeply influenced by the idea of fairy tales than the tales themselves, but he has nonetheless contributed to a growing body of work that rejects many of the diminishing effects of the sanitized

18 According to Theodore Ziolkowski (1977), Western tales using the Venus-ring motif were often a metaphor for cold feet or anxiety regarding sexual performance on the wedding night. In Burton's version, especially, we can see Victor's fear of disappointing Victoria as a husband. While the film makes no overt references to sexuality, adult viewers should not find this a huge deductive leap.

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fairy tale. His 2010 interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland*—surprisingly produced and distributed in collaboration with Disney—will likely not be the last time he draws on tales and fables for ideas. The sudden cooperation of Burton and Disney, furthermore, implies a new direction for the longtime perpetuators of safe, predictable stories. It appears that Burton's dungeon days are behind him, and he has finally secured the creative authority to lead Disney onto new paths—if ever so tenuously.

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